

Newsweek

Veterans Day: Grading the Pols

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From the magazine issue dated Oct 27, 2008

John McCain is the candidate most associated with military veterans, but a [new report](#) by the nonprofit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America gives him a weak grade on his support for vet issues. NEWSWEEK's Jesse Ellison talked to the group's executive director, Iraq War veteran Paul Rieckhoff.

Your methodology has been criticized.

Yes. Some folks say, 'You shouldn't have hit people who missed votes.' [But] it's part of your job as a senator. The bottom line is, you can't support veterans if you're not there to vote on the issues.

You gave Barack Obama a B and McCain a D. Why did Obama do so much better?

Our scorecard is heavily weighted on the GI bill. McCain was not a supporter. And he missed six of the nine key votes. Obama, although he got a B, is still below average. McCain missed more votes than Senator [Tim] Johnson, who was in a coma. They both missed more votes than Ted Kennedy, who had a brain tumor.

McCain, of course, is a veteran. It seems hard to believe that he would fare so badly.

People tend to blur the war and the warriors, the people and the policy. You don't have to be a veteran to support veteran's issues.

Some accuse your organization of being a partisan political group masquerading as a nonpartisan think tank.

Plenty of Republicans got A's. We put the formula in place and we put in the votes, and it spits out a grade. People want to say, 'You gave McCain a grade.' Well, this is what McCain earned.

But you did release the report just weeks before the election.

We released it now to inject it into the national political discussion. If you look back on the first debate, the only discussion of veteran's issues was this wristband conversation they had. "I've got a wristband." "No, I've got a wristband." That's not the level of dialogue we need.

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